SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Matthew Rinaldi

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

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William Winter Archives and History Building

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Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit *"Freedom Rides: Journey for Change"* conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

WELCH: Ok this is Speak Now recording number 008. This is LeAnna Welch, with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Friday, May 27, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights era memories is Mr. Matthew Rinaldi. Welcome.

RINALDI: Thank you. I was born June 2, 1947 in Brooklyn, New York to parents of Italian-American heritage. I grew up in an all White community on Long Island in Valley Stream. My involvement in the Civil Rights Movement began in the early sixties when I was a high school student. I applied to the National Science Foundation for a position in, in a summer program, in math, and I was accepted by Morgan State College without any understanding at all that I was, as a White person going to a historically Black college. I spent the summer there, for the very first time in my life becoming acquainted with and friends with Southern Blacks, and my roommate was another high school student named Kenneth Chestnut from the deep South. Near the end of the summer, he was very impassioned that we should go into town, in Baltimore, and see the movie, "Hud" with Paul Newman and I couldn't understand why it was so important for him to see it right then and he explained that he would not be able to see it in the movie theater back in his home town which was "Whites only" and, I couldn't believe it. Even though intellectually as a White person I knew about segregation, it had never affected me or anyone I was emotionally close to up until that moment, and it made me realize what was actually happening. I went home to Long Island and joined Long Island CORE, became—and I became—active in some voter registration, some issues around job discrimination and housing discrimination, and when I was looking for colleges to apply to, I was struck by a, a newspaper article about Oberlin College because in…1964, students from Oberlin had been active registering voters for Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in Holly Springs, and the Black church in Holly Springs where meetings had taken place had been burned down in retaliation, and in a 1960s version of "What would Jesus do?" the thought was well Jesus was a carpenter, Jesus would help rebuild the church. So they had created something called "Carpenters for Christmas" and they…went to Mississippi and rebuilt that church in Holly Springs and it made the news in the North and encouraged me to go to Oberlin. I started at Oberlin in September of 1965 and joined Oberlin Action for Civil Rights. That summer, excuse me that winter…OACR—Oberlin Action for Civil Rights—sent a group of about 30 students to Mississippi to work with the MFDP. We first spent the night in the Delta and attended a mass meeting where Fannie Lou Hamer spoke, and she was indeed as powerful and as moving as everybody says. We then went to Jackson, and were assigned to different locations, and I was in a group of 18 or 19 students who were sent to Kosciusko in Attala County. This was 1966 now—February of 1966 was winter break for Oberlin then—and there was a change going on in the Movement and one of the changes was that parts of

the Movement in Mississippi at that point started practicing self-defense and, basically, I was ready to do whatever they told me to do. So, when we arrived at the Freedom House in February, a number of people were sent out to stay at local homes, but the local Civil Rights workers—the full-time Civil Rights workers—asked if anybody had any experience with guns and, I had learned how to shoot a rifle on—in—on a rifle range and another student had gone hunting in, I believe, Wisconsin with his father. So the two of us were assigned to do guard duty at the Freedom House on Nash Street in Kosciusko. We were so lacking in Mississippi street-smarts that even though we were in the Black community which meant dirt roads, no sidewalks, and an entirely Black population, when we first saw two carloads of White men drive by the Freedom House we just assumed it was traffic and when they came back a second time, we just assumed they must be lost. So it was not until the third time that they actually stopped in front of the Freedom House and opened fire. Fortunately for all of us, this was a period when people had shot guns and 22-rifles, not Glocks and Uzis and AK-47s. The window shattered, shotgun pellets came through the tar paper walls, and at first I just hit the ground but the fellow who was with me got up and started to head out to the front porch and somehow his energy drove me out there or I followed him out there and we stood on the porch and fired back, not trying to hit anybody, frankly the last thing I wanted to do was hit the car or give them a flat tire. I was not interested in having them stay around. We were trying to encourage them to leave which they did very quickly, and in retrospect, I think that they had come to hurt us or possibly to kill us, but they were not…anticipating risking their own lives, and so they sped off. And we never had trouble again in the, in the town of Kosciusko. We spent the week doing voter registration, we sat-in at a number of restaurants in town including Rib Alley on Courthouse Square, we tried to integrate the movie theater but were not able to get in the door. And we made a big impact, in the sense that people understood that the local Civil Rights Movement could call on additional organizers at any time.

I then came back that summer and spent the entire summer organizing in Attala County. This did require parental permission and I did have to spend a lot of time convincing my parents, particularly my mother, that this was a reasonable thing to do, and they finally did consent. I came back, and it was already the beginning of the split within the Civil Rights Movement with some Civil Rights leaders advocating Black Power and there's—were already counties by 1966 that were not welcoming to White Civil Rights workers, but since I had been asked to return by the MFDP and they had a strong base in Attala County and they knew me there, I was sent back to Attala County. I was paired up for the summer with Luther Mallet who was a local high school student. At the time, I was a first-year college student and he was a high school student so we thought, "Well I'm the old guy and he's the kid." And, now we're both 63, we're about eight months apart, and still in touch, so there really wasn't much of an age difference, but being

paired with Luther made a tremendous difference for me because he was totally welcoming and embracing of me, helped me integrate into the Black community, get to know people, get to know how to act in a way that was appropriate. And we spent the summer, again, doing voter registration which in and of itself was not an easy thing to do. We talked very often to people who would say to us that they would go register but then, were too afraid to actually go do it, and there were also times when I felt that, in my interactions with some older Black people, they were…for their own safety so conditioned to agree with any request from a White person, that I would talk to them about registering to vote and they would say, "Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I'll register to vote. Yes, sir," but they were saying that because I was White and not because they were able to overcome their own fear about registering. But on the other hand, many people did, particularly younger people. We also, I think found that by 1966 there was already a migration to the North of, particularly younger Black men who worked in the auto industry in Detroit, for example, and they would—they came back often—to visit relatives during the summer and they shared that there really was a different way for society to be organized. And there was one woman, Shirley Lewis, who had already engaged in the reverse migration. As she put it…you go to Chicago and you visit a friend and, they offer you a drink and down here, you go visit a friend and they offer you a meal, and she came back because she preferred the culture of living in the South. But she too had been influenced by being in the North and not to say there wasn't discrimination and forms of segregation in the North because there most certainly were, but it was not the kind of terrifying White supremacy which existed in Mississippi at that time. Luther had had an uncle who had been lynched, and as a child he had gone with his father to cut down the body. There were tales of a World War II veteran who had come back to Attala County to a small town known as Ethel and the tradition was that you were—as a Black person—if you were walking on the sidewalk and a White person was walking toward you, you were supposed to step aside and the story was that he refused to step aside and the next day he was found dead. So, people—my experience was that people—lived in a state of fear, and that was the method of control. And I think it's important to say that it wasn't just Black people who lived in a state of fear. White people who had any inclination of treating Black people as equals also lived in a state of fear, and also were intimidated by the more extreme White supremacist elements in the White community. So we had a number of interesting experiences with local White people who supported us or at least assisted us, but very secretly…we had some people who brought us food, we had some people who…called us with information if they knew that the Klan was planning something, because there was a phone in the Freedom House in Kosciusko. So I slowly came to realize that even the White folks in Mississippi who, who wanted change were afraid at that point, for the most part, afraid to step forward.

We held many meetings in Black churches in Kosciusko and had a lot of support from the Black churches. By August we had a march in Kosciusko itself, and we had…an understanding with the chief of police for the city of Kosciusko, which is—has to be—differentiated from the sheriff for the whole county. The sheriff for the county I remember as being very hostile but the chief of police…really was a true lawman. He wanted to—the county and the city—to live by the law and Attala County is northwest of Neshoba County and he did not want the city of Kosciusko to get the reputation that the city of Philadelphia or the county of Neshoba had, so his, his self-perceived role that summer was to keep the peace. It didn't—I have no idea how he felt about integration or—versus—segregation but I do know for sure that he didn't want trouble and he was as ready to warn us of impending difficulties as some of our late night callers.

This was also the summer of the Meredith—James Meredith—March against Fear. James Meredith was from Kosciusko, and he—I believe it was in early June—started, by himself, to march from the Tennessee border into, into Mississippi with the idea that he would march all the way to Jackson. I don't think he got more than a few miles, if that, before he was shot, not killed, but shot and wounded and there were photographers on the scene so there, the visuals were seen around the country. He was already famous because he had integrated Old Miss and the Civil Rights Movement responded by creating a, a much larger march from the Mississippi-Tennessee border to Jackson. At a certain point in time...would've been June 24th, I believe, would've been the second anniversary of the disappearance of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, and a delegation from the Meredith March came to Philadelphia to commemorate their disappearance and those of us in Attala County who were active went to Philadelphia to participate in the march, which was led by Dr. Martin Luther King. And my memory is that when we first met with Dr. King in the Black community, it was clear that a White crowd, some might call it a mob, was gathering. Certainly that it was hostile and, in private, Dr. King was fearful. He led the march. It was unprotected, even though there were Neshoba County sheriff—Sheriff Rainey was still the sheriff—Cecil Price was still a lawman in the county and they did not offer us any real protection. Insults were thrown at us, cherry bombs were thrown at us, some White folks tried to drive cars into the line of march. So we were all pretty shaken by the time we got to downtown Philadelphia and the courthouse square, which was packed with hostile White community, including the rooftops and I remember Luther and I mostly watching the rooftops because we were very afraid that there would be a sniper. What stands out for me now is that even though we had experienced Dr. King as sharing his fear…in private, when we got to the courthouse square and he started to speak, he was calm, he spoke slowly, he, to some extent…calmed the crowd, and in my memory, silenced the crowd at one point when he said, "We are here to commemorate the killings of Goodman, Chaney, and

Schwerner and we all know that their killers are right here among us." I…I understood at that moment…the greatness of the man. We then marched back to the Black community, again being taunted and threatened and that night there were multiple shootings in the Black community documented by a book called "Witness at Philadelphia" by a local White woman. We had already returned to Kosciusko at that point. We were called at the Freedom House and asked to come to the Black community to help protect them. We did so. At a certain point, we ran into a police blockade and could go no further, and we parked the car on the other side of the blockaded area and went in on a foot trail led by a local Black man. And at some point the police realized we were trying to get through their blockade and started chasing us and I had a watch at that time that I had been given by my parents as a grad—high school graduation—present that on the back said…"Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," and foolishly I thought it would be safer in my pocket than on my wrist, so I took it off my wrist and put it in my pocket and in the process of running, to get away from the police who were chasing us, I lost it, so somewhere in the—on the—outskirts of Philadelphia, a few feet down in the dirt by this point, I would assume, is, is a watch with that inscription on it. By the time we got to the Black section of town, the shooting was pretty much over. The book, "Witness to Philadelphia," says that, there was one of the White shooters who was actually wounded in that exchange of fire, I have no direct knowledge of that. We spent the night on a rooftop, and the shooters did not return.

A few days later…there was a second march which was widely publicized. Additional marchers came from the Meredith March to join. Reporters from New York City were there, which did not make the local community—the local White community—very happy, but it did mean that the state troopers came to protect us and that march was entirely peaceful.

I spent the rest of the summer in Attala County, sometimes doing things that in retrospect were…unnecessarily reckless. Luther and I would drive around at night with spray paint and anytime we saw a KKK on a fence or post or a building, we would paint over it. We took down "Colored" signs at gas stations, using a dime as a screwdriver. We were pretty clear that we were going to erase all signs of White supremacy, to any—to the—extent that we could. At one point, we tried to integrate the one swimming pool in Kosciusko, and 24 of us attempted to enter the swimming pool. We were all arrested before we could enter the water. I don't know what it is about water I, I think there's a visceral feeling that…skin pigmentation is water soluble and some White folks might've been afraid that if Black people were swimming in the same pool that the White people would become black. But there was a tremendous fear of sharing that space. And…fast forward to the present I'm, I'm friendly now with a White businessman in Kosciusko named Preston Hughes who's…about my age, maybe a little older, and, and

he said, “Well, you know what happened afterwards. The South, as it's done all too often, shot itself in the foot yet again and bulldozed the swimming pool, because there was so much concern that federal law would force integration that it was deemed wiser to…lose the ability to swim for everybody rather than risk having an integrated swimming pool.” I was charged with malicious mischief for that offense, had a trial in Kosciusko, I believe the judge was Roy Nichol, and we were sentenced to a 120 days in jail for the crime of trying to integrate a swimming pool. But we posted appeal bond, and I stayed in the county and at another point, later in August, Luther and I were dispatched to McCool which is a small town in the county, in the northwest corner of Attala County; a very disturbing town. It had only two stores. Blacks were not allowed in the stores, there was a front door for White people and a side door where Blacks could place an order, but even if it were raining, they had to stand there and wait for whatever it is they were going to purchase. Luther and I set up a Freedom House in McCool. Went back to Kosciusko to get our gear and our clothing and some food and returned the next day, and by that time, the Freedom House had already been burned down. We made a decision to rebuild the Freedom House on the ashes—a new Freedom House—on the ashes of the old and a family that was very active at that point in the Civil Rights Movement and which housed me part of the summer was Elmore and Beatrice Winfrey, and Mr. Winfrey was a carpenter by trade, and he was the one who had the expertise and the knowledge and the skills that allowed the rest of us, with his supervision, to, to build the Freedom House, yet again in McCool.

I'm making this recording in 2011, less than 10 years ago, PBS did a documentary, first I think called “African-American Roots,” and then they did a special on “Oprah's Roots,” and they contacted me and it was only at that time that I learned that Elmore and Beatrice Winfrey were Oprah's grandparents, and I never met her because at that time she was in the North living with her mother, Vernita Lee, but I had taken photographs of Mr. Winfrey at the building site, and this being preparation for a television documentary, they loved having visuals. So Luther and I are included in a segment of “Oprah's Roots” which focuses on her grandfather and his tremendous courage in helping us to rebuild the Freedom House. And it should never be forgotten that Beatrice Winfrey, his wife, was equally courageous because for them to shelter us and help us at that time put them at great risk. I think it's also important to emphasize that…Elmore Winfrey's story would not be known if his granddaughter had not become famous, and yet it was the actions of tens of thousands of people like Elmore and Beatrice Winfrey that really changed the South, and made it a movement. We’re all familiar with the leaders' names, but many, many stories of people whose contributions were equally important are not known, and I'm glad that the story of Elmore and Beatrice Winfrey is now, now known.

We did do voter registration in McCool. And, I will say this too, there was

a moment when we were doing the rebuilding, and there were probably four or five of us working on the project, including two Black teenagers from Kosciusko who had come for the day, and one of them went to a nearby house to ask for a particular tool that Mr. Winfrey needed, and he came back and he was awestruck and I asked him what had happened, and he said, "Well that, that was a White man's house." And I said, "Well, I'm glad you're okay," and he said, "No, no, you don't understand. He not only was perfectly willing to lend the tool, he told me where it was in the barn and didn't follow me into the barn which meant that he actually trusted me to take and borrow just that tool." And I, this teenage worker said to me, "I've never had that experience before" and it, it really had changed his outlook on White people as well. So I think there were as well many untold stories of local White people who were sympathetic to the Movement, who aided the Movement in very subtle ways. But their contribution was important as well, and has not been fully recognized.

I did finish out my time in Attala County. I did return to college which was always a struggle—an issue—for Civil Rights workers from the North. I mean, it was one thing to come here in the winter; it was one thing to come here in the summer. But as a Northerner I could always go home and going home meant going back North, where I was safe…and there was always some element of guilt because here we had stirred up things and…asked local people to put themselves at risk, but when they went home it was two blocks away, not 2,000 miles away. Fortunately, Luther was, was not hurt. His sister and brother, Jean Mallet and Wiley Mallet, were also active, they were—they had—joined the Meredith March for Freedom and were beaten when that march was attacked in Canton, Mississippi and I think it says something about their mother that she had three children who were all active in the Civil Rights Movement, and somehow was able to survive herself and, and overcome her own fears and let them be active.

I thought about returning in 1970. I called a local attorney in Kosciusko to see what might happen if I came back, and, and his…somewhat caustic remark was, "Well, y'all come down, and we'll find out." So I didn't come back in the seventies. But I did come back as part of the filming of the Oprah Winfrey show, and I must say that people in the city were very, very warm and hospitable. The mayor was very welcoming. He introduced me to Preston Hughes who I come to—I've come to—feel is a friend. And he's changed, too. He said that when he was in high school he used to…get together with some friends on a Saturday night and drive into the Black community and shoot at the houses and they just thought it was a prank. And I asked him why he changed or how he changed and he said it was really—it really started—with the…the abduction of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner. So I think it's important to remember that they weren't immediately found dead, I mean not to say that…Medgar Evers isn't also an important martyr, but the difference was he was shot on his—in his—

driveway by Byron de La Beckwith and everybody knew right away that he'd been killed whereas Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner went missing, and the story that circulated in the White community was that this was a hoax, that they were up in New York laughing at people and, I think Senator Stennis might've even said that on the—in, in—Washington, D. C. I think Governor Paul Johnson said it at the time. And certainly Preston Hughes was told that by his, by his, family and, and his community that that, that they hadn't been killed, that, that it was a hoax, and I asked him, "Well was that true even when the burned out station wagon was found?" and he said, "Oh yeah sure, that was just part of the hoax." So I said, "Well, what changed you?" and he said, "What changed me was when they found the bodies, and it was that, you know, here in the South we were taught to respect our elders, and I certainly did. But it was the first time in my life when I realized they might be wrong." And that conversation took place probably in 2006. And the fact that we could have that conversation openly and freely was a wonderful thing.

When I first entered this state I certainly had, what we now would call PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I would go into a restaurant; I absolutely had to have my back to the wall so that I could see everything. I was, I had that heightened state of alertness out of fear, but being back in Kosciusko since then, I've realized I don't need to be afraid. And being back here this week in May of 2011 for the reunion of the Freedom Riders and, and having an extraordinary welcome…from Governor Barbour, from the mayor of the city of Jackson, and from people on the streets has been tremendously healing, and I'm just so grateful that the state has been so welcoming to us, and I'm so happy that it has really, really changed. Thank you.

END OF RECORDING

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